



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Meningococcal Disease

What is meningococcal disease?

Neisseria meningitidis bacteria are normally found in the nose and throat of 10 – 15% of healthy persons. Rarely, the bacteria enter areas of the body where bacteria are not normally found and cause a severe, life-threatening infection known as meningococcal disease. Examples of the disease include meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) and septicemia (bloodstream infection). There were an average of about 9 cases of meningococcal disease each year in Indiana in 2013 to 2017.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms include:

- Fever (sudden onset)
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Skin rash that appears as bruising or bleeding under the skin
- Nausea and vomiting
- Eyes that are sensitive to light

In babies, the symptoms are more difficult to identify but may include:

- Fever
- Fretfulness or irritability
- Poor appetite
- Difficulty in waking

How is meningococcal disease spread?

The germs that cause meningococcal disease are spread from person to person *only through direct contact* with saliva or droplets from an infected person's nose or throat. Some common ways the germs can be spread are:

- Living in the same household
- Kissing on the lips

- Sharing drinks from the same container (glasses, cups, water bottles)
- Sharing eating utensils (forks and spoons)
- Sharing a toothbrush, cigarettes, or lipstick

People who have had close contact with someone with meningococcal disease should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease.

Who is at risk for meningococcal disease?

Young infants, students attending high school or college, and military recruits are more likely to get the disease. People with a weakened immune system are also at higher risk for the disease, as well as those who live in crowded settings or have household exposure to cigarette smoke.

How is meningococcal disease diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider may collect blood or spinal fluid to see if meningococcal bacteria are present.

How can meningococcal disease be treated?

The disease is treated with several different types of antibiotics. It is important to seek medical attention immediately, as an infected person may become very sick within a few hours. Early treatment may reduce the risk of complications or death from the disease. Taking appropriate antibiotics for 24 hours reduces a person's likelihood of spreading the bacteria.

How is meningococcal disease prevented?

Good hygiene can prevent the spread of germs that cause meningococcal disease. Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, throw away used tissues, and wash your hands often. Do not share eating or drinking utensils or other items placed in or near the mouth, such as lipstick or toothbrushes, with others.

There are vaccines in the U.S. that protect against most types of this disease. See your healthcare provider about which vaccines are right for you. A dose of meningococcal vaccine is recommended for children 11 or 12 years of age with a booster at 16 years of age. The vaccine is also recommended for people with increased risk for the disease. Revaccination after five years may be indicated for certain at-risk individuals.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/index.html>.

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